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The Executive's World ADVERTISING AND MARKETING

Another company is trying to get into the razor blade market—and imitating the Wilkinson no-advertising approach into the bargain. **ANTONY THORNCROFT** reports

A hush-hush launch

NEXT WEEK some of the leading men's wear retailers could be stocking Jewel razor blades. If this marketing breakthrough does happen, Jewel, the manufacturer of the blades, and Blades Industries, the sellers of the product, will be even more convinced that, in marketing anyway, lightning can strike twice. For Jewel hopes to achieve the wildly optimistic sales target of 10 per cent of the trade by the end of next year by the same method that Wilkinson had pioneered: no advertising in the initial stages, and complete reliance on word of mouth recommendation.

Jewel has an impressive pedigree. The company is run from Sheffield by two production engineers, Leonard Clements and Ralph Abbott, who worked on the Wilkinson blade. The process adopted is taken under licence from Gillette, although with a Dupont coating on the blade rather than the ICI version used by most British blade manufacturers. After leaving Wilkinson, Clements and Abbott moved the world setting up razor blade production lines. On returning to this country they found no difficulty in making their own blade, but were at a loss on how to sell it.

Last December they were approached by Blades Industries, a subsidiary of the Frankenberg

group, which is basically a wholesale warehouse organisation. Blades committed itself to selling all the blades that the Sheffield factory could produce, which is currently 1m a week. It did this in the same way that it has marketed other goods, sending samples to wholesalers, especially cash and carries, and hoping for favourable orders as a result. In this case the response was 12 per cent, about four times the usual follow up of samples. This was particularly encouraging since the minimum order was 100 boxes valued at well over £100.

Blades Industries has little knowledge of what happens to the blades after they have appeared in the cash and carries, although perhaps 3,000 retailers in the London area are now stocking them. As yet they cannot compete at the consumer level. Any future success depends entirely on public demand, for the blades at 2s 6d for five, are among the cheapest stainless blades on the market. However, Blades competitors doubt whether the conditions are identical with the Wilkinson situation. Then the product had a distinct quality advantage over other

blades. Jewel's attraction is its price, but it is arguable whether consumers buy razor blades for reasons of price. They go instead for reputation, for the assurance that the product can do what is, after all, a rather personal job. This is particularly true of women who buy 40 per cent of blades, and like the security of well advertised brand names. Wilkinson Sword and Gillette certainly guarantee promotional support for their blades, both spend well over £600,000 a year to ensure consumer confidence, a very high expenditure in a trade which is valued at only £14m.

On top of this Jewel can find little encouragement in the previous attempts of smaller manufacturers to crash into the razor blade market. Personna is now pushing hard, particularly with below the line promotions, and special offers in co-operation with other companies, but the share of the market not commanded by Wilkinson or Gillette has shrunk in recent years from 12 per cent in 1963 to about 10 per cent today. Razor blade users are notoriously con-

servative, and nine out of 10 consumers buy the same blade again.

On a wider front there are few marketing examples of companies that have successfully launched a product without advertising support, except in the quality goods field. Old marketing hands can recall Dunhill cigarettes; there was, of course, Wilkinson, and just recently a beer company and a motor oil manufacturer have introduced new brands with just point of sale publicity. But in both these cases the new products have arrived on the back of existing and well-promoted brands.

Jewel is not completely without support. There has been a little advertising in the trade press, and a PR campaign is to be launched. Blades is also creating a subsidiary market for its throughput in own-label blades for the supermarkets. This is an under-exploited field, largely because of the ease of pilfering such a small pack, but Blades has developed a bigger container, and hopes to develop this second string to its activities. Blades admits that it will have to advertise eventually, if only to re-assure its

stockists and consumers. This could conceivably be a mistake. There is probably a role for a small razor blade manufacturer with low overheads and good quality control checks on its production. Trying to compete with Gillette and Wilkinson Sword at their own level, in the fierce in-fighting of retailer discounts, special offers, lavish competitions, and half-million plus appropriations is the quickest way to a substantial loss.

Fortunately for Jewel and Blades there is another challenger in the ring ahead of them. Personna, the Philip Morris subsidiary, is about to swamp the market with 12m. free samples over the next year, some aggressive advertising, and a target of a quarter of sales within two years. The two market leaders, who quarrel about everything else, are united in their disdain for such competitors: "Anyone can give away ten million blades," says one. "It requires skill to sell them." But if Personna does make an impact with its hard sell it might leave the way open for Jewel to make some quiet progress, especially in specialised markets. For Gillette and Wilkinson Sword dominance might be revealed as only as strong as their advertising expenditure, and there still seem to be plenty of shavers around who are looking for a smoother shave and a more reliable blade.